

Gang Membership, Delinquent Friends and Criminal Family Members: Determining the Connections

by
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Abstract

Using survey methodology, this study compared type and severity of delinquent acts of gang members with delinquent friends and criminal family members and non-gang members with non-criminal family members and non delinquent friends. Analysis of variance was conducted to examine the differences on measures of differences among the three groups. Gang members with delinquent friends and at least one family member with criminal history were found to have a higher rate of offending during the past year when compared with the other groups. The contribution of family criminality to gang membership and gang activities was also examined. Gang membership was found to independently affect delinquency beyond the effects of having delinquent friends and criminal family members.

Literature on the relationship between gang membership and delinquency suggests that gang membership increases the frequency and severity of delinquent acts among youth. It is also evident from the existent literature that having delinquent friends also contributes to an individual's delinquency. In addition, having a criminal family member is also known to have intensified individual involvement in delinquency. However, whether it is these associations with delinquent friends and/or criminal family members that contribute to the increased delinquency among gang members or it is the gang membership by itself that increases the frequency of delinquency is not fully explored. Being involved in a gang and being associated with delinquent friends have been shown to contribute to an individual's delinquent behavior. The unique contribution made by criminality in family to the gang membership and the unique contribution of gang membership to delinquency has not been studied well. It is possible that increased delinquency among gang members is due to gang membership or their association with delinquent friends and criminal/

deviant family members. This paper examines the extent to which gang membership contributes to delinquency above and beyond having delinquent friends and criminal family members.

Research on gangs has focused on relationship between gangs and delinquency (Huff, 1990; Miller, 1990; Spergel, 1990), ecological approach to gangs and delinquency (Shaw and McKay, 1942), gang involvement and drugs and delinquency (Fagan, 1989; 1990, Sirpal, 1997), gangs as delinquent groups (Hagedorn, 1988; Klein, 1971; and Miller, 1975). There have been many studies (Thrasher, 1927; Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1989, 1990; Rhodes and Fischer, 1993; Vigil, 1988; Spergel, 1990; Thornberry et al., 1993; Sirpal, 2002) that have examined the relationship between gang membership and delinquency by comparing gang and non-gang members. Most of these studies have reported that, in general gang members are more involved in delinquency and commit more serious delinquent acts.

Thrasher et al. (1993) reported that when they compared the delinquent activities of gang members before and after joining the gangs, delinquency rates were significantly higher after joining the gangs than before joining the gangs. They also reported that gang members, when compared with non-gang members, did not have higher rates of delinquency before joining a gang. Bjerregaard and Lizotte (1995) reported that in their research they found that compared to non-gang members, gang members were twice more likely to carry a gun and commit more severe delinquency acts and three times more likely to commit drug offenses.

In addition to gang membership, other significant variables that seem to affect delinquency rates are: prior delinquency, delinquent friends and family criminality. Several studies (Thornberry et al., 1994; Elliott et al., 1985; and Elliott and Menard, 1996) reported that prior delinquency and delinquent friends were some of the strongest correlates of delinquent behavior. Other researchers argue that youth gangs and their activities are grounded in community disorganization and/or the dysfunction of the family unit.

Elliott et al. (1985) and Johnson, (1979) reported that having delinquent friends was one of the strongest predictors of delinquency. Thornberry et al. (1994) found that association with delinquent friends reinforced and promoted the environment conducive to heightened delinquency. Elliott et al. (1985) reported that prior delinquency and friendship with delinquent friends were the primary and direct indicators of later delinquency and drug use. Most of these studies have compared juveniles with delinquent friends and juveniles without delinquent friends regardless of gang membership (Thornberry et al., 1991; Elliott et al., 1995; and Elliott and Menard, 1996).

The concept that families teach children to distinguish acceptable behavior from unacceptable behavior, vanquish unacceptable behavior, defer gratification, and respect the rights and property of others is known and established (Kakar, 1998;

Sirpal, 2002). For quite some time, experts on juvenile delinquency have recognized the family's central role in predicting and preventing juvenile crime. In the beginning of this century (1915) Douglas Morrison in his book **Juvenile Offenders** remarked that "the family is chief" social circumstance that has a hand in determining the future of the individual (cited by Kakar, 1998). Almost by the end of the century, Geismar and Wood (1986) concluded that, "Family functioning variables as a group seem to be inextricably linked to delinquent behavior. Juvenile delinquency appears to occur disproportionately among children in unhappy homes" (p. 30). The role of child rearing in molding children's lives has also been recognized for a long time (Kakar, 1998; Sirpal, 2002). The kind of care parents give to children, the context they create for their growth, and the framework they create for later learning spring from the rhythms of that life and from the values that give it meaning (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994).

Loeber and Dishion (1986) reviewed approximately 300 studies and presented a meta-analysis. They concluded that the most powerful predictors of juvenile delinquency included parental supervision, parental rejection, and parent-child interactions. Snyder and Patterson (1987) characterized juvenile delinquency to be an "end-product of inadequate socialization" (p. 218). They reported that the roots of delinquency in inept families can be observed in childhood. They reviewed more than 100 studies on delinquency and developed a two-stage model. They hypothesized that inept family interactions with children lead to incompetent socialization which in turn affects children's functioning and reinforces the development of antisocial behavior. These children are likely to develop no or few life and social skills contributing to rejection by their teachers and peers and drawing them into association with other delinquent children. Sampson and Laub, (1993) examined a relationship between parental deviance and delinquency. They reported that parental deviance provides deviant models and undermines social control in the family. Henggeler (1989) reviewed several studies that analyzed the relationship between family interactions and child psychological functioning. They reported that low levels of parental control strategies, inept or ineffective parental control and parental anti-social behaviors were the strongest predictors of delinquent behavior.

A few studies exist that isolated the effects of delinquent friends, and family criminality from gang membership and examined the effects of gang membership on subsequent delinquency. For example, Morash (1983) reported that friendship with delinquents was strongly associated with future delinquency while gang structure was not significantly associated with individual delinquency. This suggests that gang membership by itself is not as important as having delinquent friends. Huff (1996) compared two groups - current or former gang members and non-gang youths - matched on age, gender, race, residence, school, and family status. He reported that gang members committed more crime than non-gang members.

Miller (1982) compared the crimes committed by non-gang youth groups and gangs. He called non-gang youth “law violating youth groups” and defined these groups as three or more youths whose members repeatedly committed crimes with support and cooperation from their friends. He reported that while youth groups had committed a large number of serious crimes such as larceny, burglary, drug and alcohol violations, assault, vandalism, and arson, gangs were involved at a higher rate in more violent offenses such as rape, assault, robbery, and weapon violations. Battin et al. (1998) investigated the contribution of gang membership to delinquency above and beyond having delinquent peers. They reported that gang members were found to have committed a higher rate of delinquent crimes as compared to non-gang members with or without delinquent friends. They also found that gang membership was found to independently predict both self-reported and officially recorded delinquency beyond the effects of delinquent friends and prior delinquency.

Thus, while the scholars have examined the contribution of gang membership to delinquency, the contribution of delinquent friends to delinquency, and the contribution of family criminality to delinquency, the contiguous effects of gang membership, family criminality, and delinquent friends on subsequent delinquency have not been examined. This research explores this area. To examine these effects, this research compared three groups of adolescents: (1) adolescent gang members with delinquent friends and criminal family members (self reported), (2) non-gang adolescents with delinquent friends but not criminal family members, (3) non-gang adolescents with no delinquent friends or criminal family members¹. The criminal activities of these three groups were compared to examine whether there were any significant differences.

METHOD

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

Data on gang members were collected from a local facility that provides services to adolescents apprehended for gang related criminal activities. Self-report surveys were used to gather data. This group included 91 gang members who had received services from the facility over the period of six months. These gang members were apprehended for gang related criminal activities. All of them reported having delinquent friends and all of them claimed having at least one family member who was either in prison or had been in prison during the last five years. These gang members were between the ages of 18 and 20 with the mean age of 18.5. Approximately 37% of them identified themselves as African Americans, 35% as Hispanic, 27% as European-Americans and 1% as other. They all reported their family income below \$18,000 a year. A majority (78%) of these gang members were male and 22% were female. Majority of the subjects (80%) were still in school in

12th grade while 20% were dropouts and unemployed. There were five respondents from schools who identified themselves as gang members with delinquent friends and criminal family members. Thus the gang members group consisted of 93 respondents.

Data on non-gang members were gathered from a high school in the same area. This school was selected because the students in this school represented similar characteristics as the gang members except that they were not apprehended for gang-related activities. In addition, the school principal agreed to allow the students to participate in the study. Approximately 300 surveyed were taken to school and the teachers were asked to select one of the 12th grade classes and administer the survey during one of their elective classes. Students who opted to respond to the surveys were given credit for one of the home work assignments. Those who chose not to participate were given an option of completing the home work assignment and get credit without any negative consequences. Students were required to finish the survey during the assigned class period and return it to the teacher who then delivered these surveys to the researcher. Out of 300 surveys 289 completed and usable surveys were returned. These surveys were divided into three groups: (1) gang members with delinquent friends and criminal family members, (2) non-gang adolescents with delinquent friends and (3) non-gang adolescents with no delinquent friends. There were five youths who identified themselves as gang members with delinquent friends and criminal history in the family, 101 youths reported not being a gang member and having no delinquent friends while the remaining 188 reported having delinquent friends but not being a gang member. These data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Characteristic	%
Race	
African American	37
Hispanic	35
European-American	27
Other	01
Gender	
Male	78
Female	22
School Status	
In school	80
Dropout/unemployed	20
Family Income	
Below \$18,000	100

MEASURES

The variables used in this study included gang membership, delinquent friends, prior delinquency of the respondent, and family delinquency.

Group status was determined using the information gathered from all respondents. They were divided into following three groups: (1) gang members with delinquent friends and criminal family members, (2) non-gang members with delinquent friends and no criminal family members, (3) non-gang members with no delinquent friends and no criminal family members. The first group included all the members from the treatment center. The first group included respondents who indicated that they were a member of a gang in the past year and identified the gang by name. These respondents also reported having at least one of their friends involved in delinquent activity and having at least one of the family members currently in prison or had been in prison during the last five years. The second group included respondents who identified themselves as non-gang members and reported that at least one of their best friends had engaged in behavior that has either gotten them in trouble with law or could get them in trouble, if it was discovered but none of their family members had ever committed any crime. The third group included respondents who identified themselves as non-gang members and reported that none of their best friends had engaged in behavior that has either gotten them in trouble with law or could get them in trouble; and had at least one member of the family with criminal history.

Gang membership was determined by asking the question, "Do you belong to a gang?" Follow up questions were asked about the gang's name, structure, and characteristics. Although gang membership of the group taken from the prevention program was certain, yet they were asked this question. Self report survey to determine gang membership is a method accepted by gang researchers (Klein, 1995).

Data on *delinquent friends* was gathered by asking the respondents to think of their four best friends. A series of questions were asked about each of these four friends. Two of the main questions were asked to determine whether any of the friends were delinquent included: (1) In the past six months, has this friend of yours ever been arrested? (2) In the past six months has this friend done something that could get him/her in trouble with the police? (3) In the past six months has this friend engaged in some criminal activity such as stealing, drugs, vandalism etc.?

Prior delinquency was determined using self-report data from the respondents. A general index was constructed by using a sum of 12 self-reported measures indicating the frequency with which the respondent committed various offenses. The list of violent offense index included offenses such as hit teacher, hit siblings, hit parents, used force to get some things, picked a fight, shoved, pushed, or threw things at others with an intent of hurting someone. Nonviolent offenses included acts such as stealing something worth more than \$50, stealing something worth more than \$5 but less than \$50, breaking into a house, destroying property, selling or

doing drugs.

Outcome Measures were divided into three general categories: (1) delinquency, (2) drug selling, and (3) substance use. Ten measures of delinquency and substance abuse were used to examine the effects of gang membership on these outcomes. The six indices were constructed for violent, nonviolent, and general delinquency acts. Delinquency was measured using self-report data. Self reported substance abuse and drug selling were also included and analyzed as a delinquency measure. This was done because literature (Fagan, 1989; Moore, 1991) suggests that gang members are generally found to be involved in drug related offenses especially drug selling.

The general individual delinquency index was computed by combining the self-reported (already mentioned) violent and nonviolent offenses as well as whether the respondent reported having been arrested in the past year. Drug selling was determined by the respondents' self reported involvement in drug selling. Substance abuse was determined by self reported measures. The questions included: "How many times have you consumed alcohol in the past month?" (Drinking). "How many times have you consumed five or more alcoholic drinks at one sitting?" (Binge drinking). "How many times have you smoked marijuana during the past month?" (Substance use). "How many times in the past month have you used crack, cocaine, tranquilizers, sedatives, narcotics, or any other illegal drug?"

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data. ANOVA was used to compare three groups on each of the ten delinquency and substance abuse measures.

ANOVA compared means for the three groups for each of the eight delinquency and substance use measures. The results indicate a consistent pattern across all violent, nonviolent, and general delinquency measures, as well as the majority of substance use measures. Means for the youths with non-delinquent friends were the lowest, means for the non-gang youths with delinquent friends and/or criminal family members higher than the first group and the means for gang members with delinquent friends and/or criminal family members were the highest on all measures of delinquency and substance use. For example, gang members reported having committed an average 29 delinquency acts in the past year, while non-gang youth with delinquent friends committed 12 delinquent acts, and the non-gang youth with no delinquent friends committed an average of 5 acts. Similarly gang members reported having abused alcohol and other substances an average of 36 times in the past year, whereas non-gang youth with delinquent friends reported abused alcohol and other substances an average of 11 times, and non-gang youth with no delinquent friends reported abusing alcohol and other substances less than three times on average during the past year.

Table 2: ANOVA Comparisons Between Three Groups on 8 Delinquency Measures: Mean Delinquency Scores and Overall F Ratios for Each Group

	Youth with Non-delinquent	Youth with Delinquent		
	Friends (N=101)	Friends (N=188)	Gang Members (92)	Overall F Ratio
Delinquency				
Violent Offenses	1.79	6.73	15.67	59.42***
Non-Violent Offenses	1.01	5.98	13.98	76.39***
General Delinquency	4.31	14.74	36.51	89.47***
Drug Selling	.09	.78	1.89	93.67**
Substance Use				
Alcohol Use				
Past month	.75	2.01	4.51	41.34**
Binge Drinking				
Past month	.27	.79	1.49	9.79**
Marijuana Use				
Past year	2.09	13.87	55.43	71.07*
Other Drug Use				
Past year	.68	2.06	4.02	12.45**

Notes: All measures are self-reported.

- *p< .05
- **p<.01
- ***p<.001

To determine the significance and the location of the differences between the three groups, Analysis of Variance was conducted. The results indicate significant differences ($p<.05$) between the non-gang youth with non-delinquent friends and gang members on all measures of delinquency and substance use. Gang members committed significantly more acts of self-reported violent, non-violent, and general delinquency. They also reported significantly more drug selling and alcohol and marijuana use in the past year than youths with non-delinquent friends. Gang members also committed significantly more acts of self-reported violent, non-violent, and general delinquency compared with non-gang youth with delinquent friends. They also reported significantly more drug selling and alcohol and marijuana use in the past year than youths with non-delinquent friends.

In general in comparison to youths with delinquent friends, gang members committed significantly more delinquent acts in the past year. Gang membership appeared to intensify participation in self-reported violent, nonviolent, and general delinquency as well as drug selling, and substance abuse. It may be either because of gang membership or because of their association with delinquent friends and criminal family members. Further analyses are warranted to determine that.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has some limitations, and the two most substantial limitations are about the sample. First, sample is small. A larger sample is needed to conduct further analyses. This limitation negatively affects the generalizability of the research. Future research should collect data from larger samples. Such a study is planned. The second limitation is that while the sample of this study included three groups, the process of sampling was not random. This limitation negatively affects the representativeness of the sample. In addition, this method is less accurate than random sampling or stratified sampling strategies because sampling errors occur. However, despite these limitations, the study presents some very significant results.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The preliminary analysis of these data indicate that family criminality (having a family member with a criminal record) and/or delinquent friends augment individual gang members' gang and criminal activities. These results suggest a role for public policy. Early interventions to aid at-risk youths may divert these individuals from gang involvement and the violence and criminal activity associated with the gang.

The results of this study also suggest that parents of youth who are in gangs should be provided with information and offered seminars. The significance of a family's role in gang prevention should be impressed upon the family members. It is also suggested that services should be provided to the families so that they can acquire skills to gain employment and set examples for the youth. The youth should be provided with education opportunities.

It is proposed that a comprehensive, multifaceted approach should be established for helping the youth in gang and their families. Such an approach should incorporate prevention, intervention and suppression activities. Communities in which gangs operate and families should be educated and solicited for assistance in helping the youth and preventing further gang activities.

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Note:

¹ Initially it was planned to have five groups : (1) gang members with delinquent friends (2) gang members with criminal family members, (3) gang members with both delinquent friends and family members (4) nongang members with delinquent friends and criminal family members, (5) nongang members with neither delinquent friends nor criminal family members. However, the surveys revealed that gang members who reported having delinquent peers also reported having criminal family members. Thus, the three working comparison groups were formed.